

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
IMPOSITION OF THE PALLIUM UPON HIS EXCELLENCY PAUL D. ETIENNE
FOURTH ARCHBISHOP OF ANCHORAGE
CATHEDRAL OF THE HOLY FAMILY, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA
NATIVITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2017**

Your Excellencies, Fathers, Religious, Seminarians and Members of the People of God, Distinguished members of the government, Brothers and Sisters,

At the beginning of this Eucharistic celebration, I had the duty and privilege of imposing the pallium upon Archbishop Paul Etienne, the fourth archbishop of this beloved Archdiocese of Anchorage. On this day, we gather in this Cathedral of the Holy Family to celebrate the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary. When families celebrate a birthday, they come together in unity; today we have an opportunity to come together as the People of God, gathered from many parishes and families, to reflect upon the different meanings of the pallium received by an archbishop.

The pallium is a piece of fabric woven with lamb's wool, which Pope Francis blessed and gave to Archbishop Etienne this year on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. It is simple yet has great meaning. It reminds the Metropolitan Archbishop and the faithful that the particular vocation and mission of every Bishop is none other than to be a Good Shepherd: A Shepherd who places his sheep, whether sick or weak, upon his shoulders, carries him, guides him, cares for him, and leads him to the source of living water.

The pallium, which only Archbishops receive, is a sign of the essential and concrete dimension of being a Good Shepherd in a Metropolitan Church which seeks to promote, maintain and enhance the fraternal and effective communion of the Pastors of the Province among themselves; between the bishops and the faithful; and, of the bishops and the faithful with the Successor of Saint Peter and the whole Church. In brief, this is what the Pallium should say to the Archbishop and to the whole People of God.

On this feast, we celebrate the birth of Mary, who, in turn, will give birth to the Savior, as we heard recounted from the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 1:1-16; 18-23). Saint Andrew of Crete says that: "The radiant and manifest coming of God to men certainly needed a joyful prelude to introduce the great gift of salvation to us. The present festival, the birth of the Mother of God, is the prelude, while the final act is the fore-ordained union of the Word with flesh. Today the Virgin is born, tended and formed and prepared for her role as Mother of God, who is the universal King of the Ages." (Andrew of Crete, *Oratio* 1, PG 97: 808)

The child born of Mary – the Word made Flesh – is named Jesus, because He will save the people from their sins. He is born from her to be with the people and for the people – to save them. The prophet Micah foretells that *he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord.* (Micah 5:4) The prophet Micah's reference to the shepherd who *stands and feeds the flock* helps us think about the task and mission of an Archbishop. Jesus, who was born in a stable, surrounded by Mary and Joseph, in the hiddenness of Bethlehem, would one day say: "*I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep.*" (John 10:10) Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and the bishops of the Church should be living reminders that *God is with us* (Mt 1:23) and that *God comes to save his people from their sins.* (Mt 1:21)

The birth of the Child can be re-read through the lens of His Passion, Death and Resurrection. In Jesus, God comes to save His People. Jesus saves by giving His life for his

sheep, when He offered Himself freely and fully as an acceptable sacrifice upon the Cross. This is what it means to be a “Good Shepherd”: to give life, to offer one’s life in sacrifice for everyone: for you, for me, for every man and woman!

In the Ancient Near East, kings often styled themselves cynically as shepherds of the people, disposing of them according to their will or whim. How different is the Shepherd of our humanity, who became a lamb – led to slaughter – to redeem us! The Good Shepherd is willing to give the most precious gift he can: the sacrifice of his own life!

The Lord desired that His service of love might be carried on until the end of time. Through his own free initiative, he called some men to be with Him, to follow, obey, and love Him – to be Shepherds of His People. After His Resurrection, Jesus appeared to Simon Peter, giving him the task of a shepherd: “*Feed my sheep.*” (cf. John 21:17). This task was made a permanent reality in the choice of the successors of the Apostles, the bishops, who are called by Christ to be good shepherds.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that “*By divine institution the bishops are the successors of the Apostles as shepherds of the Church.*” (LG, 20) This gives particular correspondence between the words of Jesus – *I am the Good Shepherd* –and his decision to choose some men, who identified themselves with Him, to be Shepherds in the Church.

Again, the Council states: “*In the bishops, for whom priests are assistants, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Supreme High Priest, is present in the midst of those who believe. ...Through their excellent service He is preaching the word of God to all nations and constantly administering the sacraments of faith to those who believe ... These pastors, chosen to shepherd the Lord’s flock of the elect, are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*” (Lumen Gentium, 21)

Shepherd of the Flock. Servant of Christ. Steward of the Mysteries of God. This is the Bishop, but, he is also teacher, priest, head, friend, and brother. Others have called him “the angel of his church.” Whenever we hear today’s Gospel, we think of Christmas, a time when many trees are adorned with an angel. The Bishop as angel is a strange and surprising image, but it helps us understand the vocation and mission of the Bishop in his local church.

Why he is called an angel? An angel is one who “protects”, who “visits”, who “counsels”, who “points toward heaven.” His function, as the prayer of the Guardian Angel says, is *to light, to guard, to rule, and to guide* the children of God. These words capture well the responsibilities and the mission of the bishop. Undoubtedly, they are tied to the virtues of *fortitude, justice, prudence, and temperance.*

The bishop “*lights*” or enlightens, through his teaching and example; this demands that he act, using the virtue of *fortitude.* His mission is to lead the community, with the heart of the Good Shepherd, firm in truth and love, always seeking the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

The bishop *guards*; here he must act with *justice.* He guards the “Holy Church, the spouse of Christ” and the Body of Christ, of which each baptized person is a member. He procures their true good, giving special attention and care to those members who are weakest in the faith, and even the sheep that are still outside the fold. He guards the deposit of faith, helping the flock walk safely in the path of truth.

He *rules* the Church with the virtue of *prudence* that comes from being with his sheep – “in front, in the middle, and behind them” – offering his example, listening to their voices and prudently discerning, fostering communion, confronting challenges, and contributing to the search for solutions without neglecting the truth.

The Bishop *guides* and governs, practicing the virtue of *temperance*, directing and accompanying the life of the Church with a spirit of humility, patience and love; promoting initiatives that contribute to the vitality of the faith, while being vigilant, like a shepherd, over the forms of pastoral activity and the use of Church goods.

The Second Vatican Council also considers the Bishop in his relationship with other Bishops, as a member of an “episcopal college” – within a group of bishops – who share in the life and concern for all the churches. Thus, the Church can be considered not only as a Diocese, with its own Bishop as head, but also as an Ecclesiastical Province, with an Archbishop as its leader.

The pallium is a reminder and call to communion of all the Shepherds who belong to an Archdiocese or Province. The Shepherd of a Metropolitan Church is a constant force for encouraging effective and affective communion at all levels of the Church. This idea of ecclesial communion is of fundamental importance for all the faithful, living in communion with their own Bishop; it provides a real opportunity to live communion with all the other bishops, with the Pope as the head, and consequently, to live and reinforce the spiritual bond, in love, with the whole Church of Christ, making concrete the desire of the Lord: *that all may be one!*

The vocation and mission of a Pastor is both challenging and rewarding. At its core, it helps people realize that in the hands of God, everything is different. This is what Saints Joachim and Anne understood when they were blessed with a daughter named Mary. The Virgin herself, at the Annunciation, entrusted herself to God, saying: *Let it be done to me according to your word.* (Luke 1:38).

In faith, we realize, through our shepherds, that placing ourselves in the hands of God and living in communion with Jesus Christ is more than something merely human; that the Church is the family of God that lives mercy, love, and communion; that the family of God is permanently sent, called to go forth proclaiming the joy of the Gospel, and showing the tenderness of the God who is the friend and shepherd of each person, without exception, and who came so that each person may have life and life eternal.

To Archbishop Etienne, I say: Take courage! In the name of the Lord, very consciously and with firm and growing faith, trust, love and *parrhesia*, sustained by the Holy Spirit, joining your hands, will, and heart to those of your brother Bishops of your suffragan dioceses, move forward, offering to the sheep of Christ “*the most effective and authentic witness, which is one that does not contradict by behavior or lifestyle, what is preached with the word and taught to others!*” (Homily of Pope Francis, 29 June 2015)

May the Mother of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this day, accompany you and this Archdiocese, sustaining and supporting your service and pastoral ministry. Through her intercession may she obtain for our brothers in the episcopacy, priests, consecrated persons and laity of this Ecclesiastical Province, the renewed grace and strength that will help us to live with courage, in fidelity and joy, our vocations as disciples, missionaries, and apostles, in the journey of faith that leads to the Father’s house! May the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd of our lives, bless you always and abundantly! Amen.